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**Title:** Autopoetics of sound and signs: toward poetry by other means

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**Abstract:** Autopoetics aims to create poetry which doesn't rely on language and its known grammatical-syntactical structure. It is an attempt to overcome the limitations of currently known linguistic territories which are inadequate for artistic communication through simple and non-purely-verbal poetic forms (e.g. visual poetry, Signalism). Autopoetics doesn't arise from the act of will and consciousness but from the space of the preconscious impulse; from the time and place before knowledge. With autopoetics, the poetess attempts to create a world, from the beginning, and not only to explain it. Autopoetics which shies away from language, creates a cosmic poetry that addresses everyone and isn't constrained by the borders of language, nationalism(s), or cultures. Thus autopoetics explores the possibility of strengthening the sensuous experience, of creating a deeper involvement in poetic sensibility through a reduction of constraints of language.

**Keywords:** poetic forms; art theory; Lettrism; hermetic poetry; Signalism

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# Autopoetics of sound and signs: toward poetry by other means

Gorica Orsholits<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Autopoetics aims to create poetry which doesn't rely on language and its known grammatical-syntactical structure. It is an attempt to overcome the limitations of currently known linguistic territories which are inadequate for artistic communication through simple and non-purely-verbal poetic forms (e.g. visual poetry, Signalism). Autopoetics doesn't arise from the act of will and consciousness but from the space of the preconscious impulse; from the time and place before knowledge. With autopoetics, the poetess attempts to create a world, from the beginning, and not only to explain it. Autopoetics which shies away from language, creates a cosmic poetry that addresses everyone and isn't constrained by the borders of language, nationalism(s), or cultures. Thus autopoetics explores the possibility of strengthening the sensuous experience, of creating a deeper involvement in poetic sensibility through a reduction of constraints of language.

**Keywords:** poetic forms; art theory; Lettrism; hermetic poetry; Signalism

In this essay, I examine the possibility of establishing a new form of poetry, autopoetics, whose aim is to create poetry which doesn't rely on language and its known grammatical-syntactical structure. It will be an attempt to overcome the limitations of currently known linguistic territories which are inadequate for artistic communication through simple and non-purely-verbal poetic forms (e.g. visual poetry, Signalism). Autopoetics doesn't arise from the act of will and consciousness but from the space of the preconscious impulse: from the time and place before knowledge. With autopoetics, the poetess attempts to create a world from the beginning and not only to explain it. In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, "It is thus that a world is always a 'creation': a tekne with neither principle nor end nor material other than itself. And in this way, a world is always sense outside of knowledge, outside of the work, outside the habitation of presence [...]"<sup>2</sup> Autopoetics, which shies away from language, creates a cosmic poetry that addresses everyone, and isn't constrained by the borders of language, nationalism(s), or cultures. Thus autopoetics explores the possibility of strengthening the sensuous experience, of creating a deeper involvement in poetic sensibility through a reduction of the constraints of language.

The concept of reduction, in itself controversial, carries particularly negative and problematic connotations within the domain of literature and poetry. It has always seemed that the richness of language comes from its quantitative dimension and, as a result, that the quality of thought

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<sup>1</sup>European Graduate School.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Libbert (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 41.

and emotions that language conveys will be increased by adding to this quantity. There are examples in art movements, for instance Lettrism, Hermeticism, or Signalism, demonstrating that the reduction, fragmentation, and insistence on the mosaic of language can be viewed in a positive way: when the reduction of language contributes to the quality of a literary and poetic text, and when that reduction has been able to satisfy “both intellect and feeling.”<sup>3</sup> Poetry need not be confined to traditional language based only on words. That language is already obsolete when compared to the power and reach of the artistic and poetic language, especially in the context of the opposition to society and the world order<sup>4</sup>. The idea which Marcuse threads through his thoughts on poetry and art is rather romantic as he proposes that the survival of art constitutes the only remaining link that connects the present with belief in the future. I will even take the liberty to state that poets always create *from* the future, regardless of whether their poetry is speaking against it.

As we talk and create from and for the future, for hope, we get a glimpse of the truth. While philosophy only talks about the truth, art actually attempts to bring it about. Of course, it is utopian truth, a truth of its own. It seems that the creators of art understand what Jean-Luc Nancy radically concluded: that today, utopias have become inoperative because they have always been structured according to representations relying on established and recognised thinking. “For five centuries we believed that utopias were achievable, and we have believed in their vanity. Now we have to think differently, and reflect on our place in the world.”<sup>5</sup>

Autopoetics possesses the freedom to be incidental and unintentional in its deliberation. As Badiou asks, “Is it exact that all thought emits a throw of dice?”<sup>6</sup> A thought that is counted only once, having neither insistence nor consistence – a thought of which material is dream and which shapes the impossible – could constitute the conditions for autopoetics to happen, based on the premise that “nothing is what it seems.”<sup>7</sup> Autopoetics should not attempt to emphasize the author’s creative uniqueness but rather to, without fear, depict creative impotence, the alienation from everyday language, the rejection of creation within established patterns. Autopoetics demands that the creation of poetry does not become simply the skill of manipulation of words within language; instead, it needs to be primarily the creation from the impulses in the realm of dreams.

Autopoetics has an interesting resemblance to the scientific theory of autopoiesis, where autopoiesis represents the sufficient and necessary condition of life – for instance, the simplest organisms survive using an intuitive relationship with nature, where it seems that they maintain their existence without any cognitive participation. Cognition is not the defining condition of their lives but their doing is equal to the state of cognition. As Pier Luigi Luisi observes, “This concept intends to emphasize that an autopoietic system is able to *perceive* external events as perturbations, and to *react* to them by adopting internal configurations of self-regulation by maintaining its organization in the given environmental conditions. In other words, the

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<sup>3</sup>Edmund Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Laurer (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 142.

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *Art and Liberation*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 124–125.

<sup>5</sup>Jean-Luc Nancy, “The West is no more”, interview by Elena Cué, *Alejandra de Argos*, 13 July 2016. <https://www.alejandradeargos.com/index.php/en/all-articles/21-guests-with-art/1418-interview-with-jean-luc-nancy-the-west-is-no-more>.

<sup>6</sup>Alain Badiou, “Is it exact that all thought emits a throw of dice?” *Hyperion* 9, no. 3, (2015): 64–86

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

autopoietic system is a system able to create, for the external pressures that it perceives, internal operations that allows it to maintain its individuality – to survive in its ever-changing medium. Cognition is what the organism does. Cognition is the doing.”<sup>8</sup> This is how a poet should be creating – without planning, just by the intuitive need for the creation of new truths.

It would appear that artists are still searching for directions of doing, transforming and formulating ways of art. We are indeed witnessing today some indications that the historical dimension and function of art is gradually shifting toward reality, toward the planetary universe of truth: “When wireless connectivity becomes fully implemented, the world will evolve into an enormous brain capable of reacting in any of its segments.”<sup>9</sup> What is absurd is that the universe of truth and the real would signal the end of art; in such a universe the language of art is spoken even though art cannot reach that universe – the existence and the truth of art are defined and justified by its non-reality and by the impossibility of reaching its goal. So art can be achievable only if it remains an illusion and keeps creating illusions. It is encouraging that art today has the possibility of entirely new manners of realisation and as such it becomes a potential contributor in the construction of the new reality, that is to say, a possibility that would eventually mean the destruction of art through the achievement of its own goal.

Does art in the ultimate sense speak in the language of revelation?, asks Marcuse.<sup>10</sup> Art uncovers the existence of objects rather than simple fragments, and pieces of matter that can be utilised arbitrarily and that are subjected to the domain of form – in other words, the objects that are inherently aesthetic. Thus, the act of creating is “the liberation of objects from the automatism of perception”<sup>11</sup> which distorts and limits what objects are and what they may become. Therefore, the destruction of the old forms of art opens the possibility for creation of the new immediacy that is enabled by the process of remembrance, where previously familiar images, terms and ideas gain a new sensual interpretation and confirmation. Silence, for example, is a very important factor of art as a means for cognition and remembrance, silence where we can hear music, silence as a wholesome dimension that is there even when not used. Aesthetic energy must seek silence and peace instead of aggression, that peace give us the ability to truly see, hear and feel what we are and what objects are.

This principle suggests the degree to which the aesthetic dimension is potentially a dimension of reality itself rather than only of art opposite to reality. It could also be said that in this manner art strives for its own realization (art as art). Art realises itself through sensibility where suppressed instinctive biological needs find their expression in artistic forms, they become materialised within the context of a different reality.

As we shall see, in the examples of non-verbal poetry I will introduce, in times of transition and major social change human perception becomes in a way over-saturated by the old-world sensual understanding. Such crises and discord in the domain of human creation, in the domain of language, which is even more emphasized in times of despair and war, appear to demand a different perception of communication through language, and it is through artistic creation that the new sensual world initially emerges.

<sup>8</sup>Pier Luigi Luisi, “The Santiago school: Autopoiesis and the biologics of life”, in *Wall Street International Magazine* (2016). <https://wsimag.com/science-and-technology/19657-the-santiago-school>.

<sup>9</sup>Nikola Tesla cited in Zvonko Sarić, “Opstanak Evidentnih Problemskih Kontinuiteta”, in *International Review of Signalist Research*, no. 22-24 (2002): 35. The translation is my own.

<sup>10</sup>Marcuse, *Art and Liberation*, 117.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

We are all familiar with the statement that it is impossible to write poetry after Auschwitz, and still all the forms we have, even the non-forms, are incapable of expressing the horrors we live through. But despite all of this, poetry was written both during and after the horrors of Auschwitz. It is being written today with all the destruction and atrocities of modern technological wars. In fact it seems that during the hardest of times some new artistic forms emerge, though the great majority of them end up representing the terrible reality by some incomprehensible abstractions. In the Lettrist poem, *Cris pour 5.000.000 juifs égorgés*, Isidore Isou mixes onomatopoeias representing the sounds of trains associated with deportation, and cries, orders, and names of places (in a mix of languages – French, Hebrew, German) in order to better represent the tragedy of the Holocaust and convey a sensual message of the traumatic event than lyric poetry could.<sup>12</sup>

GUERINGUE! Himler, guimièrè, mèringue  
 jimièrè, jéringue.  
 HASS!  
 lebanne – letrain; le train lebanne  
 le vanne – leganne – lemain lèlan  
 tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i  
 tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i tfff-i  
 B ßß

— — — — —  
 Auschwitz – schwitz – schwitz  
 Auschwitz – schwitz – schwitz  
 Buchenwald!  
 Bouhnwald!  
 ADONOOOI! ADONOI!  
 Belsen – Bergen  
 BELSEN – BERGEN!  
 MATHAUSEN!  
 Mathaousenne:  
 MOGHILOW!  
 MOGHILOOW!  
 Galgal – Raïwensguergue  
 Ranne – Wilde Waïbensguergue  
 WOI zennenne FANNY moïsché rachelle  
 OI! CHHEMA ISRAELLE!  
 élohénou lad!  
 Élohénou  
 EHAD!  
 M9μ

In times of crisis it seems that poetry intensifies its action towards negation and rejection of the

<sup>12</sup>Isidore Isou, “Cris pour 5.000.000 juifs égorgés” cited in Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, *Beyond Words: Experimental Poetry And The Avant-Garde*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2019), 18.

existing reality, so that the change of form, questioning poetry itself, and refusing to accept the imposed truth represent only some of the ways poetry reacts. Poetry does not sing or speak definitive truth, historical truth; instead, it somewhat clumsily, inadequately and rather vaguely pushes towards some surrogate truth, just so that we can briefly feel it and then continue searching and yearning for it. Poetry provides direction for alternative thinking and therefore alternative life, as well as for new values of existence, deeply rooted in the realm of dreams, which can blossom into a new truth.

The movement of Lettrism appeared in war-torn Europe after WWII (principally in France) and was established by the poet Isidore Isou. This form of poetry involved speaking of destruction, trauma, war through the use of letters and claimed, in their first manifesto published in 1942, that “the word is the first stereotype”. Sound poetry, from Kurt-Schwitters’ “Ursonate” to the work of Henri Chopin with “Altagor,” believes in the transformative potential of technology as long as technology serves humanity. It elevates the poetry to the level of liberation and advocates that “science itself and its technologies will allow [us] to leave the age of the symbol and the stubborn stage of utilitarian life behind for productions of a freely sovereign art, for a universal music of sound, dynamic or plastic.”<sup>13</sup>

To vanquish, Lettrism must be PURIFICATION, VENGEANCE,  
TERROR.

Soon the first fires will engulf the bordels of Paris to make  
more room for Lettrism.

I promise you this!

MY LIFE must be a great ACTION.

Gabriel Pomerand, 1946

Hermetic poetry from the 1930s in Italy also puts an emphasis on the sound of the word, equating it with the meaning. The movement emerged as a reaction to fascist culture and sought to counteract verbal manipulation and propagandist mass communication. Hermeticists tried to preserve the true meaning and significance of words by reducing them to their sounds. According to Paul de Vree<sup>14</sup>, in *Poesia visiva: een keuze*:

All preaching is an assault on human liberty. Poetry as I conceive it is no longer the chambermaid of princes, prelates, politicians, parties, or even of the people. It is ultimately nothing but itself: a vocal phonetic phenomenon of psycho-physical origin objectively structured with the aid of words, sounds, and mechanical and graphic means (recording and writing). The purely visual verbal does not exist.

<sup>13</sup>Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, *Beyond Words: Experimental Poetry And The Avant-Garde*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2019), 30.

<sup>14</sup>Paul de Vree, *Poesia visiva: een keuze*, Antwerp, 1979; Artwork.



It always evokes sound or noise from whence it comes and of which it is the sign. The poem is an emission of respiration either audible (performed) or silent (read), creatively modulated, provoked by the necessity to speak, not referring to anything other than the sensibility of being (present and planetary). This is what I understand by the objective intention of vocal sounds: a concerted communication of creative spontaneous vibrations. Phonetic poetry cannot exist without a reinvention of recital, that is, a sound system or the directing of sound. Everything depends on the new possibilities of mechanical expression to realize the transmission of the poem's total sensitivity, itself at bottom part of the total kinetic spectacle Henri Chopin foresees with the inevitable utilization of wave-driven machines. The oeuvre of sound is the result of teamwork under the direction of the poet and the ideal reproduction is that realized on hi-fi disk. Here too the machine is indispensable. It goes without saying that the reciter (if it is not the poet) and the sound engineer (with regard to recordings) personally contribute to the originality of the realization. At the dawn of the electronic era, poetry can no longer be a *fabliau*.

Signalism, which I consider to be closest to the ideal of autopoetics, is an art and literature movement founded in Yugoslavia in the 1950s. It had almost disappeared in the 1970s but subsequently reappeared in the 1990s, in parallel with the process of the country's disintegration, war, and transitional crisis. In their rebellion against the order of things, proponents of non-verbal aspects of poetic expression give priority to the semantic over the substantive, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the work of art. "The sign opens up the unknown layers of consciousness and the subconscious, in search of ontic secrets and hidden powers of the spirit."<sup>15</sup> Mental images, concepts, schemas and formulas are expressed in non-verbal forms and structures, from visual through phonics to mail-art, which can be manifested as a form of decomposition of the basis of natural languages.

In Signalism linguistic signs are graphically materialized in the visual poem, becoming visible. The semantics of "visible" in this sense are ahead of "readable". Vocabulary signals correlate with signs of non-verbal communication, and only in their interaction are they deciphered and aesthetically conceived. Visual poetic thinking, free from "pragmatic speech," therefore possesses the dimensions of a complex socio-psychological and cognitive process.

The language of Signalist poetry is a sort of universal poetic language which contains and unites within itself varying, and often diametrically opposed, forms of human knowledge/science – including exact, natural sciences, their formulae, numbers and symbols, but also humanistic disciplines. Works of art such as collages, graphics, objects, as well as kinetic art and media art are central to this movement. In its own polysemantic language, the work of Signalism unites the 'sign as a cosmic natural phenomenon.' It is for this reason that the language of Signalism is completely symbolic. Ljubiša Jocić<sup>16</sup>, one of the founders of the movement, considers that within Signalism lies "the new key of the new man." In the current digital epoch, the meaning of signals is derived from the fact that it is "a sign of the appearance of a meaningful nature" and

<sup>15</sup>Miroljub, Todorović cited in Milivoje Pavlović, "Signalistička neverbalna poezija" in *Avangarda, neoavangarda i signalizam*, (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2002), 283.

<sup>16</sup>Ljubiša Jocić cited in Miroljub Todorović, *Courses Of Signalism*, (Belgrade: Everest media, Međunarodna kulturna mreža "Projekat Rastko"), 1974–1976, accessed April 3rd 2021. <http://www.rastko.rs/knjizevnost/signalizam/-delo/11190>.

that a “sign signals.”<sup>17</sup> Signs are tied to actual reality and the idea that, in poetry and poetics, especially in the language of Signalism, there exists no distance between signifier and signified. There exists a merger and unity between the aesthetic reality of language and the social reality. In other words, there is an original form and unity of linguistic and aesthetic acts.

In the view of Signalists, the poetics of Signalism rise above symbolic and semiotic theories and aesthetics with the intention of articulating a new form of poetic creation. The poetic language of Signalism is a specific kind of “dreamlike vernacular” and because the visual poetry of Signalism was born from the “dreamlike landscapes of reality” it can count on the “deepest emotions” which appear in an “electron spin.”<sup>18</sup> In the language of Signalist poetry, reality itself (nature and society) talks about itself and belongs to the consciousness of a new man which cannot be manipulated by technocracy nor bureaucracy because the ontology of Signalist poetry is in essence creative and emancipatory and consequently it excludes every act of aggression and violence from itself.

Visual poetry, in relation to these themes, documents an exceptional aspect of Signalist poetry which encompasses the purpose of the receptive dimension of the aesthetic act of creation. Because it brings words into images and images into words, into letters, into voice, drawing on words and writing – better said: printing on images. Signalism carried out a very specific unification of the creative act and receptive processes which exert themselves in the experiential sphere as well as in the sphere of intellectual, critico-creative stance-taking of the receiver towards the creation she/he is experiencing. This is the manner in which Signalist poetry approaches the universal origin of language, which is materialised by generic speech in the planetary-humanist ontology of the unity of art and poetry.

Signalism continued living from the 1950s through the 1990s because Signalist poetics does not eliminate the category of subject, the subjective gesture and one’s own handwriting. This creative movement negates lyrical enthusiasm and delight, poetic sugar-candies, the cult of tradition, para-myths and the fear of the different.

As Miroljub Todorović observes, “In phenomenological poetry something is expressed mostly which was insisted on by Signalism, at least in its main course, by its very beginnings – a desubjectivisation of a poem and of a poetical picture. The language in phenomenological poems is metaphoric one, any subjectivity is neglected, one tends to a description of phenomena, beings, things, without any burdening with the universal and transcendental. In audible poetry a voice substance of particular words is stressed, with an attempt to express by it the meaning of all a poem. That meaning is formed on a phonic level, but at the same time it is in an immediate connection with its morphological mark. Voice units are separated and multiplied:

I loveeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>Veselin Ilić, “Poetika srpskog signalizma” in *Savremenik* 36, no. 1-3 (1990), 237. The translation is my own.



eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee  
 eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee

and they begin to function as a transferring sense mechanism of one, by voice grouping formed, source of associations, not only of audible, but also of verbal and visual ones. Voice becomes there a bearer of meaning, of sense. Its acoustic, intonational, visual properties, emphasis, place in words, possibility of collaboration with and influence on other parts of a poem (word), are used for creation of quite new poetical forms.”<sup>19</sup>

It can be questioned how Signalism will manage to activate the ossified institution of art and liberate it for reality. Signalism is conceived as a sign of a new reality, orbiting the Earth riding a wondrous electron. Visual (Signalist) poetry destroys language and the traditionalist understanding of literature and art. It goes, it could be said, from a meaning to a sign, destroying the semantic fortresses of script and Gutenbergian civilisation. The linear syntactic and grammatical chains of texts are shattered and, instead, *textual surfaces* are being created, where their multidimensionality is expressed. Thus the sign has been discovered as a basic model not only of new poetry, but also of the entire civilisation it can contend with. Semiotics has replaced semantics. Semiotic analysis has become a key for solving specific poetical messages. Signalist art sees its basic function in introducing the *new* into the word, in creating the forms and revealing the contents that will change human consciousness.

Forms of poetry such as Signalism, Lettrism, Hermetic Poetry, lead to autopoetics and give us hope that we can do anything with nature and society. If we can do anything with nature and society, if we can speak and write about life and death, reason and reality, conscious and unconscious, subject and object, then why would we not be able to establish, determine, and unite all of these into a seminal form based on a non-aggressive aesthetic intuition? Or in the words of Shaw, “Aesthetic intuition produces from the identity of subject and object, of conscious (free) and unconscious (natural) activity: it is ‘intellectual intuition become objective’ through the work of art.”<sup>20</sup> The necessary knowledge exists. There also exist the instruments and materials for the constructions of such social and natural environment in which unsublimated life instincts would redirect the development of human needs and capabilities and repurpose technological advances. These pre-conditions exist as the basis for the creation of the *beautiful* which is not just a decoration, which is not only the surface of the ugly and is not a museum exhibit but is the expression and the goal of the new human: a biological need in the new system of life. This possible change of the role and function of art would enable art that transcends itself to become a factor in the reconstruction of nature and society, in the reconstruction of the *polis* – becoming therefore a political factor. It would not become political art nor politics as art but art as the endeavour to renew society.

The space of art can become the training ground for that new vision of the world, for that

<sup>19</sup>Todorović, *Courses Of Signalism*.

<sup>20</sup>Devin Zane Shaw, *Freedom and Nature in Schelling's Philosophy of Art*, (London and New York: Continuum, 2010), 65–66.

new thinking, that new illusion where poetry employs new language, new form, new poet, new world, new art, new truth. Such poetry, which we are still waiting for, is autopoetics, poetry by other means, poetry beyond words. Autopoetics in its entirety insists on ontological unity of thought, intuition, and dreaming. And that is, simply put, the unity of the acts of creation and reception. Such an understanding of poetics erases the intervening factors that are contained within traditional art and poetry. Autopoetics leads toward the end of poetry, the end of art and the end of the world we know so we can start again – anew.

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